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The European Union's challenging but imperative green transition

Launched in December 2019, the much advertised European Green Deal aims at making Europe the first climate neutral continent by 2050. This objective was supported by a will to decouple economic growth “from resource use” and to ensure that “no person and no place is left behind”.

In its various domains of action – “From Farm to Fork”, “Sustainable Agriculture” and “Biodiversity” – the Deal is reflected in a number of objectives that include a sharp decrease in the application of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, of antibiotics as well as a significant reduction in food wastage, together with a major expansion of the area under organic farming.



One year later, a study made for the European Parliament by the Institut National de Recherche pour l’Agriculture, l’Alimentation et l’Environnement (INRAE – the French research institute for agriculture, food and the environment) and AgroParisTech (the main French agricultural university), estimated that “EU agriculture and food practices are currently not on the right track to meet the Green Deal ambition, objectives and quantitative targets related to climate, environment, nutrition and health issues in that sector.”

This conclusion therefore emphasises the need for a steady implementation of the Green Deal so as to correct the track followed so far by Europe's food and agriculture.

The study puts forward a series of facts that illustrates the magnitude of the work to be done:

- Greenhouse gas emissions originating from agriculture, which had decreased until 2010, have since remained stable;
- Biodiversity erosion, soil, water and air degradation continue and reached alarming levels because, in particular, of the generalised application of synthetic chemical inputs;
- A large proportion of the European population does not comply with dietary recommendations consistent with Green Deal nutrition and health objectives.

These are findings that will sound familiar to the ears of regular visitors of hungerexplained.org.

To substantiate them, the report recalls concerning statistics produced by the [European Environment Agency](#):

- **Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions:** GHG emissions from agriculture in the 27 member countries of the EU slowly decreased between 2000 and 2011. They grew slightly between 2012 and 2018, but remained at around 400 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent. Simultaneously, the net absorption of carbon resulting from land use, land-use change and forestry fell quite substantially from 330 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2006, to less than 260 million tons, a trend that, if it continues, would mean only about 100 million tons in 2030! The carbon footprint and its evolution are therefore clearly unfavourable.
- The amount of **pesticides purchased** are relatively stable since 2011 at around 350,000 tons (it is noteworthy that Portugal, Denmark and Ireland succeeded in reducing their use, while Cyprus, Austria and France increased theirs).
- The **consumption of nitrogen fertilizer** follows a growing trend that, if it persists, could reach a total of 9 million tons by 2030, in contrast to little more than 7 million tons in 2009. Germany, Spain and France have the greatest responsibility in water pollution, because of their excessive application compared to what is actually absorbed by plants.
- The only positive point has to do with the **use of antibiotics** in livestock farming. It has strongly decreased from around 160 mg/PCU (milligrams per kilogram of standardised animal weight) to less than 110 mg/PCU, which means that if this trend is confirmed, it might be only approximately 20 mg/PCU [[read here on the consequence of using antibiotics](#)].

The Green Deal also envisages a sharp increase of **organic farming**, the objective being that by 2030 it should cover at least 25% of cultivated areas in the EU. In reality, it weighed only 8% in 2018 and, if the rapid growing trend observed since 2012 continues at the same rate, it would only cover 12.3% of the area cropped in

2030, according to the authors. This would be less than half of the declared target.

However, this very poor performance could be greatly enhanced if sufficient efforts were made to promote organic farming. This would, in particular, imply supporting technically and financially those producers who decided to move away from conventional agriculture that uses large amounts of synthetic chemical inputs. It is the price to pay for the EU to improve its achievements and bring them near to the objectives it fixed. The development of organic farming (that, by definition, does not apply synthetic chemical inputs and strictly limits the use of antibiotics) would help to reduce considerably the use of pesticides, of nitrogen fertiliser and of antibiotics.

As for GHGs, opinions diverge regarding the impact of a rise of organic farming. It seems positive if the analysis is confined to the plot (GHGs/ha cultivated) and rather negative if you consider the product (GHGs/kg). However, the result is undeniably positive if you replace organic farming in the context of the food transition of which it is an element and that must absolutely encompass a series of changes in our way of eating, with their political, time-related and socioeconomic dimensions [\[read\]](#).

In any case, it is quite clear that the EU will have to step up its actions in order to operate a successful climatic and food transitions. These transitions will only be possible if the assistance and incentives provided to economic agents in the framework of recovery programmes and national and EU budgets give sufficient importance to measures that will support them, and if these financial means are simultaneously reinforced by regulations as well as by information and training for both producers and consumers.

To know more:

- Guyomard, H., Bureau J.-C. et al., [The Green Deal and the CAP: policy implications to adapt farming practices and to preserve the EU's natural resources – Executive summary](#), European Parliament, 2020.
- Guyomard, H., Bureau J.-C. et al., [The Green Deal and the CAP: policy implications to adapt farming practices and to preserve the EU's natural resources](#). European Parliament, 2020.
- European Union, [A European Green Deal – Striving to be the first climate-neutral continent](#), Website.

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Opinions: [Rethinking Food and Agriculture – New Ways Forward](#) by Andrew MacMillan, 2021.

- In France, organic is growing fast, 2020.
- Obstacles to transition – Why is it so difficult to make our food system more sustainable and climate-friendly? 2019.
- Opinions: Catastrophic Antibiotic Threat from Food by Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Tan Zhai Gen, 2017.
- Food, Environment and Health, 2017.